

THE
ENGLISHWOMAN'S
DOMESTIC MAGAZINE.

AN ILLUSTRATED JOURNAL,

COMBINING

Practical Information, Instruction, and Amusement.

NEW SERIES.

VOL. III.

LONDON:
S. O. BEETON, 248, STRAND, W.C.

THE OLD MAN IN LOVE.

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I.

THE church clocks in the neighbourhood of the Rue Joubert struck three—three hours after midnight. At the same moment the time was repeated by a gorgeous little clock on the mantel-piece of a bedroom on the second floor of a house in the same street—a bedroom sumptuously decorated in the style of Louis XV. At the same time an observer, endowed with the magic crutch of Asmodeus, might have seen hastily thrown open the silken curtains of a bed, with a gilded canopy, in the same room. From this bed a man of a very mature age sprang upon the carpet with a very juvenile leap, put on his black velvet slippers and rich dressing-gown, and, after lighting two candles, began to walk round and round the room, like a lion in his cage. After spending some minutes in thus waking himself up, the gentleman threw off his dressing-gown, and began to prepare for going out, an operation which he performed with unusual vivacity for an old man, talking to himself in the following strain:—

"I cannot bear this doubt; whatever it costs me, I must clear it up. I may as well walk the streets as be awake all night in bed, and I shall get some fresh air at all events. One thing is certain, that after the opera he managed to follow us to her very house. But how did he do it, unless he got behind the coach? This girl will kill me before my time. I wonder whether they understand one another? If I thought they did, I would—yes, wouldn't I? Why, during the whole of the performance the fellow was staring at her, and she must have noticed it. The other day, at the concert, it was just the same. I must put an extinguisher upon this coxcomb. But, after all, I don't care for him—I care for *her*! Oh! Erminia, Erminia! Heighho!"

As he finished his soliloquy, the old man, having finished dressing, opened one of the windows. Meeting the cold breath of a winter's night, he drew back, and helped himself to a cough-drop. However, he manfully put on a great-coat with a thick fur collar, and prepared to go out, but a thought struck him—

"I don't mind catching cold," said he to himself; "but at this time of night it would not be safe to go into that street without arms."

So the old gentleman helped himself to a brace of pistols, and put them in his pocket; in another moment, however, he took them out again.

"That will never do," thought he; "even with firearms, what could I do against half-a-dozen thieves? I should exasperate a robber into a murderer! And then a nice thing it would be to have people reading in the papers to-morrow morning, 'Last night M. Lareynie was assassinated under the window of Madame Dupastel!'"

Replacing the pistols in the box, our venerable friend took his purse from the mantel-piece, emptied out of it a dozen gold coins, and, counting the rest over, said—

"Forty-five francs is quite enough for my ransom, in case of thieves. Pistols are all braggadocio; money's the thing!—Now, then, I must slip out without waking Baptiste. He's a good lad, that valet of mine; but if I catch him cutting any jokes at my expense, off he goes!"

So M. Lareynie opened and shut doors with the air of a schoolboy going to play truant, walked down the stairs as light as a cat, and glided past the porter's lodge like a ghost. Once fairly out of the neighbourhood, he breathed more freely; nor did he grow very uneasy as he passed along the ill-favoured district which surrounded the Madeleine. To thieves he had, as we know, made up his mind, but he met none, and, before long, stopped before the house where slumbered, or was supposed to slumber, the cruel fair who had kept him awake. Sheltering himself a little from the cold under a gateway opposite, he saw that somebody was, probably, up and about on the first floor; at all events there was a light there. Two mortal hours he stood watching this light. Soon the stars went out in the sky, and the lamps in the street did likewise. At last the cock crew; and at the sound of the voice of that bird, M. Lareynie was seized with sudden remorse.

"So, I have wronged her by my suspicions, have I?" thought he. "Here is broad daylight; any visitor would have gone away before this. What a fool I was! And yet, didn't I see him, with my own eyes, standing last night on this very spot? But what does that prove? That he is in love with her, perhaps, or trying to make her believe he is. But because he has tracked her home, it doesn't follow that she has given him any encouragement. He's an impudent fellow, and I'll be bound she hasn't even noticed him! Well, well, we excitable fellows are too hasty. Poor dear Erminia, she is sleeping the sleep of innocence, like an angel, I'll be bound—doesn't know I've passed the night under her window. No, by Jove! and she mustn't know it. Boys' tricks, boys' tricks! not like a man in love. Heighho! I'm rather chilly. Good gracious! I'm so stiff that I shall hardly be able to get home again. Bah! at the Beresina I was another fellow; but, bless my heart, at the passage of the Beresina I was twenty-three years younger, that I was!"

By this time shops began to open, workmen began to move hither and thither, and, lastly, the door of Madame Dupotel turned on its hinges, and a servant peeped out into the cold morning. So M. Lareynie gathered his fur collar up to his nose, and trotted away. Convinced that his suspicions had wronged the woman he loved, the old soldier of the Grand Army made all the haste home that he could, omitting, however, to straighten his back, and square his shoulders, as was his wont when there were people to see him. Having reached his apartment, he slunk back to bed, then got up again, took his bath, and resigned himself to the skilful handling of Baptiste, whose morning task it was to rejuvenate his master for the day's conquests. The process was long and repulsive. When it was completed, M. Lareynie dismissed the valet, and took a survey of himself in the glass, and seemed particularly to admire his hair and moustache, both as black as ebony.

"Heighho!" said he; "this herald night has made me ten years older!" and he ran his fingers over the deep wrinkles on his forehead. "Upon my word, I think chestnut hair would have suited me better than black: this wig makes my complexion look paler than it otherwise would do. But I can't change it now—her eyes are so quick. By Jove, what hair I used to have! It's a great bore that a man does not get old in his feelings as well as his hair. Why can't I say I used to have a heart?"

Finishing his soliloquy, the old gentleman stifled a sigh, put on his hat with the nicest precision and just the shade of a jaunty turn, and rang for his cabriolet.

Half-an-hour afterwards he walked into the reception-room of Madame Dupastel, bearing in his hand a splendid bouquet which he had bought on the road.

II.

THE woman who had filled the bosom of M. Lareynie with a passion which had been too strong for his years and his common-sense, was a handsome creature of twenty-five, whose arch eyes, self-possessed behaviour, and inscrutable smile suggested the possession of much more cleverness, mischievousness, and coquettishness than are necessary to drive to desperation, ten times a-day, a man who is really in love. At this particular moment she was dressed ready to go out, and was writing a note before starting. As the door turned on the hinges she lifted her head, and acknowledged the presence of her antiquated adorer by a look which had as much of sour as sweet in it.

"Ah! it's you, colonel?" said she, pretending to be surprised. "I didn't expect you this morning. Yes, that's a beautiful bouquet; but may I trouble you to put it down in the dining-room? I have a headache, and flowers will make it worse."

M. Lareynie carried out this little injunction with the resignation of a man accustomed to obey orders, and then came and stood by the side of the lady.

"You didn't *expect* me?" said he, insinuatingly. "Did you think it possible, then, for me to pass a day without seeing you?"

"Come," answered Madame Dupastel, "you have got back all your usual gallantry, I see. That's good; much better than your sulkiness yesterday evening."

"Sulkiness!" said the old man, indulging in a little juvenile gesticulation; "that's a hard word! Anybody but you would have called it sadness, or melancholy, or depression, or——"

"Well, say caprice," replied Erminia, laughing; "say caprice—that will do! But by what right do you give yourself airs in my drawing-room? What was the matter with you? My aunt tells me that, in escorting her home, you didn't say a word the whole of the way."

"I was thinking of you," answered the poor old colonel, tenderly

"Of me, or of him?"

"Him? what him? That stupid little fellow Randeuil?"

"Oh, his name is Randeuil, is it? It's a nice name."

"And I suppose you think he's like it?"

"I think he's better: don't you?"

M. Lareynie looked at the carpet, and held his tongue for a few seconds. At last he spoke—

"Erminia! you know how I love you! What pleasure can you take in worrying me?"

"Worrying? Oh, I should be so sorry."

"Then show a little indulgence to a weakness of which you are yourself the cause. True love cannot exist without jealousy."

"Oh, I don't admit that. I don't authorize people to love me; but I expressly and positively forbid jealousy. So, if you have any idea of pleasing me, you must get rid of *that* fault."

"Well, I'll try," said the colonel, submissively. "Are you writing to your cousin Jane?"—and he bent forward towards the writing-desk.

"Perhaps I'm writing to my cousin John," replied Erminia, playfully hiding the letter.

"Ah! or to that precious Adonis!" said M. Lareynie, with suppressed rage.

"Now, that *would* be against all rules," said the lovely girl; "it's his business to begin."

As she spoke, her maid, cautiously opening the door, entered the room, and handed her a letter. Erminia broke the seal with an indifferent countenance; but when, after she had read a line or two, she had glanced at the signature, a mixture of surprise and curiosity overspread her features.

"Waiting to see me?" said Erminia, when she had finished reading the letter.

"The person that brought the letter is waiting—in the street," replied the girl, mysteriously. "He wants an answer."

Madame Dupastel looked at the letter again, reflected for a moment, and at last said—

"Let him in, Victorine. See," she continued, when Victorine had gone out—"see what he writes to me."

Greedily the colonel seized the letter, and read as follows:—

"MADAME,—I earnestly hope you will forgive the liberty I take in soliciting from you the favour of an interview. The happiness of my life depends upon it. The situation in which I am placed is so full of difficulty, and its exigencies are so imperative, that the least delay might have consequences for which you might one day reproach yourself. I *know* that you are at home; give me, then, only five minutes! My name, unknown to you, gives me no claim upon your notice; but, when a kind action is to be done, you will not let my being a stranger stand in the way. One word, I implore you! I am waiting your answer.

"HIPPOLYTUS RANDEUIL."

"Randeuil!" exclaimed the old man, blazing up: "what does he mean by daring to write to you?"

"You think he is very impertinent?" said Erminia, with affected gravity.

"Yes, I do. And are you going to see him?"

"I have no reason for shutting my door in his face."

"What! see a man you don't know!"

"Well, you know him; so, if you think it's irregular, introduce me."

"You must be joking, Erminia. Admit to a *tête-à-tête* a man who has openly followed you up for so long! Why, it's giving him an excuse for compromising you with the world."

"Do you think I'm a woman who can be compromised?" inquired Madame Dupastel, looking very serious.

"Angels themselves may be accused. It is my duty, as your friend, to prevent your committing yourself in this way. I will see this gentleman——" and the old colonel moved towards the door.

"Thank you," said Erminia, decisively; "but I never accept a favour which I have not solicited."

"Why, good Heaven! he wants to see you alone—he wants a *tête-à-tête*!" said M. Lareynie, stopping short of the door.

"You mistake: it is only an interview he wants. But you can make a *tête-à-tête* of it if you like."

At this sort of half-dismissal, the old gentleman plunged down upon the sofa in despair.

"As you please, madame," said he; "and I don't know that a whim more or less matters much."

Before Madame Dupastel could answer him, the door opened and let in a handsome, well-dressed young man, looking very excited, and, in his general carriage, not unlike a soldier about to lead an assault. He darted towards the mistress of the house, but stopped short as he caught sight of the unexpected third party who sat there, with a look in the keen grey eyes that glittered under his false eyebrows, that seemed to say the place would not be taken without a struggle. The lady kept her seat, and did not, by a look or gesture, do anything to help the newcomer out of his embarrassment. However, he quickly recovered his self-possession, and said, very respectfully—

"Madame, when I took the liberty of requesting the favour of an interview, I hoped to see you alone. Allow me still to hope for that privilege."

"This gentleman is an old friend of my family," replied Erminia; "and you can have nothing to tell me which he might not listen to."

The colonel thanked her by a grateful look, and squared himself on the sofa.

"Indeed, madame, what I have to say must be heard by you only," said Randeuil, speaking mildly, but firmly. "Allow me then to speak just a few words, without the presence of a third person."

"After what the lady has just said, your importunity is misplaced, sir," interposed the colonel, sharply. The young man turned round to him, and said, though very politely—

"I spoke to madame, and not to you. I do entreat you," said he to Erminia, "not to refuse my request."

"The lady has already told you——" answered the old man; but this time he was not permitted to finish his sentence. Erminia was one of those women who always change their mind when they find their "mind" supported by another, and who have a particular dislike of despotism in the shape of "advice."

"Excuse me, colonel," said she, rising; and, without hesitation, she moved towards the door of the dining-room, opened it, and beckoned Randeuil to follow; while, at the same moment, she nailed the old man to the sofa, from which he had half risen, by darting at him an authoritative glance which he durst not disobey.

"Now then, sir," said Erminia to the young man, "I am ready to listen. What have you to say to me?"

Randeuil was about to shut the door close.

"That is no good," observed Erminia, half humorously, half anxiously.

"Perhaps he will overhear?" suggested Randeuil, looking askance at M. Lareynie, whom he perceived to be as easy on his sofa as if it had been the gridiron of St. Laurence.

And now, indeed, Erminia laughed outright. "Well, well!" said she, "in the first place, he's rather deaf; and, in the second, why, probably, you can speak low."